Christmas Past

by Dick Blide

I have to guess that it was about 1937 and we were still in the midst of the Depression. The timing of the Great Depression varied across the world; in most countries, it started in 1929 (two months before I was born) and lasted until the late 1930s.

My Dad was employed but it was tough sledding with four kids. Even at age eight, I knew that Dad had big bills at the two local food stores. In those days you could charge your purchases and pay off the bill at regular intervals. Our parents had told us that there would be no Christmas presents this year because there just was not enough money.

So I was sad as were my brother and two sisters. One thing that would make me feel better back then was to go behind a chair in the living room and stoop down over the hot air vent in the floor. I guess the heat generated a soothing feeling. I believe that I may have shed a tear or two at that time also.

I remember it was mid morning, Christmas Day, when there was a knock at the door. To our surprise, on opening our door, Nat and Gordy, two older cousins, stood there holding arms full of gifts. I couldn't believe my eyes. They handed out gifts to all the children. Mine was a large, heavy package. As I tore off the paper, I could see that it was a Wyandotte something. It turned out to be a battery-operated pressed-metal shooting gallery. Ducks would move across the front as targets. It came with a gun that shot sucker darts. I immediately tried it out and managed to hit a few ducks which fell over when hit. I was hooked!

Soon I became quite proficient at hitting flies on the kitchen wall, too, with the sucker darts, much to my mother's consternation. Christmas had turned from sadness to joy with just a knock on the door.

My other great childhood memory was several years later when my Dad gave me a chemistry set which he had made by hand. It was a metal cabinet about two feet by two feet square, and eight inches deep, all made of tin. There were several shelves which were stocked with chemicals that Dad had received from a chemist friend at work. Included was a booklet on how to perform different chemical reactions.

I soon found a use for one of those chemical reactions. A friend in back of where we lived had a model railroad on which we both worked. This was during WWII so I got the idea of placing little piles of potassium permanganate in the miniature railroad town. We then flew our planes over the town and with an eye dropper full of glycerin, dropped glycerin on the permanganate piles which resulted in a flare and a **whoosh**! – almost like a real bomb. We turned the lights down and it looked quite surreal! Of course, we never considered the safety hazard of fire. Fortunately the piles burned out fast.

The other dumb thing I recall doing with my chemistry set was making a thermite fusion bomb. I lit it in the backyard. It fizzed and flared and produced a great deal of smoke. My mother came out mad as heck. I hadn't paid attention to her wash which was hanging on the clothes line. She claimed that I had ruined her wash.

Perhaps the best memory of all is when all the family and relatives would get together for the holidays to celebrate. There was no better gathering than at Christmas time. Usually we met at Aunt Esther's large house which could accommodate thirty or so people. Each family brought a dish and we always had a large turkey.

While waiting for dinner the kids would play games: checkers, chess, dominoes and monopoly. The men would sit around and smoke and talk while the women were all either in the kitchen or dining room helping with the meal. Once the meal was served, the older boys would compete to see who could eat the most. I was the small one who couldn't keep up. The joy and celebration lasted most of the day.

Every December during the season of joy and celebration I always think about Christmas past. What great memories!

1930: Dick Blide

1934, Rochester, NY: Dick is third from left.